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A STUDY OF THE ROLE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT SABBATH  
IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of Asbury Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
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Chapter IIntroductionStatement of the Problem

This study seeks to determine the role and function of the Old Testament sabbath in the New Testament.

Limitations

This study will be limited to the issue of a weekly sabbath as stated in the fourth commandment of the Decalogue in order to determine whether the Bible teaches that one day, particularly Saturday or Sunday, is to be hallowed above another day and have extraordinary community standards applied to it. In the Old Testament, it will concentrate on the sabbath commandments in the Decalogues of Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15, and on such Prophetic exhortations about the sabbath as Jeremiah 17:19-27 and Isaiah 56:1-8. In the New Testament, it will involve key passages from the Synoptic and Johannean Gospel traditions about the sabbath, along with the epistle to the Hebrews. It will not involve other sabbath images such as the seventh year, and the Jubilee. It will not examine the role of the sabbath in speculative eschatology with reference to Christ's second coming.

Method and Assumptions

This study will follow a canonical method in examining the role of the Old Testament sabbath in the New Testament. The canonical method is seen as most appropriate

because this study seeks a definition of the sabbath from the whole canon of scripture in its final form.

The canonical method will serve best in the examination of the Old Testament text because it is not imperative to resolve a picture of the historical development of the sabbath. That is, it is not necessary to know to what extent Israel borrowed sabbath legislation from other peoples, nor to picture perfectly how the nation of Israel, in the Old Testament period, actually observed the sabbath in different eras. It is necessary to develop a composite picture of the sabbath as it appears in the final form of the Old Testament.

It is assumed that a canonical picture of the Old Testament sabbath will best approximate the understanding of the sabbath held by the New Testament writers.

A general historical survey of intertestamental and first century Judaic sabbath theology will be presented before examining the New Testament sabbath. This is necessary because the New Testament writers, especially in the Gospels, expose their sabbath views by reacting to extant practices and opinions. The writer to the Hebrews produces more scriptural exegesis, but here again it is by way of contrast to the Judaic interpretation. The overall method in approaching the New Testament will be canonical because the church's authoritative answer to the problem must come from the whole corpus of revelation, and not rest in preference for one tradition. The

answer to the problem depends on the broad agreement of the New Testament witnesses, not on their peripheral variations.

Perhaps the most obvious obstacle to a historical study, and best support for the canonical approach in this area is the prevailing witness throughout scripture which denies that Israel ever successfully kept the sabbath. Therefore, whatever could be learned of Israel's actual sabbath practices could only yield the wrong example. The question which this study must provoke is whether the church has ever yielded a correct example.

#### Relevance

The sabbath merits careful study because keeping it is a divine commandment. Yet, the Christian way to fulfill this commandment remains an unsettled issue in the church. Some sects call for a first day sabbath, some a seventh day, and some deny any day peculiar status. (See the review of the related literature below.) Thus, sabbath studies have a very practical value for the Christian seeking to obey God's will.

The issue behind Christian obedience in the matter of the sabbath is the authority of the Old Testament. The sabbath provides perhaps the best case for studying the relationship between the two Testaments.<sup>1</sup> Neither Testament sets aside the sabbath. Even when Paul exhorts

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, ed., From Sabbath to Lord's Day: a Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 17.



the Colossians (2:16) to let no one judge them according to a sabbath, he is not proscribing the sabbath in essence, but the attitude of judgment upon the day. Moreover, he says that it is a shadow of things to come (2:17), not a relic of the past. Thus, the sabbath has as much significance in the New Testament as any other portion of the Decalogue.

The biblical literature, of Old and New Testaments, is adamant about the importance of correctly observing the sabbath. Sabbath-breaking carries dire consequences with it in both Testaments. Jeremiah places the sabbath as the seal on the door of judgment facing Judah (17:19-27). Breaking that seal will break Judah; preserving that seal will secure the country and the monarchy.

When the return from exile climaxes the Hebrew scriptures (2 Chron 36:22-23), the sabbath appears to be restored (cf. Ne 13:15-22). However, the Old Testament appears to vary its conclusion as to just whom the sabbath belongs. Nehemiah sees the sabbath as the incumbent duty on the exclusive community of Jews repatriated from the exile. Isaiah sees the sabbath as the opportunity for universal membership in that community (cp. Isa 56:2-8 and Ne 13:1-3, 23-30). Intertestamental studies indicate that Nehemiah's view toward exclusivity won out in that period.

The New Testament revives the sabbath controversy. In the Gospels, the sabbath is the catalyst commandment.

Jesus encounters fair approval in his interpretation of the Law (Mt 7:28). However, his understanding of the sabbath becomes a flashpoint between him and the religious authorities. The sabbath forms the catalyst for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. His claim to Deity is the reactive ingredient; angst for sabbath rest sets the conditions for an explosion.

Thus, the sabbath question forms the ragged edge of the Old Testament's search for rest; and it becomes the very stage on which Jesus presents himself for crucifixion in the New Testament. Sabbath studies are relevant because to come short of sabbath rest makes one guilty of Christ's blood.

#### Review of the Related Literature

Literature relating to the Biblical sabbath expresses three divergent theses. Each thesis is primarily concerned with the obligation of the sabbath day. The first thesis maintains that Christians ought to keep the sabbath on the seventh day (presumed Saturday) according to the mandate given to Israel in the Decalogue. The second thesis would obligate Christians to a similar observance, though one held on the first day (presumed Sunday). The third thesis refutes any sabbath obligation for Christians in terms of observing a particular day.

The first two schools accept the sabbath as primarily a creation institution, universally binding. The third school sees the sabbath as primarily a Mosaic in-

stitution with the seventh day of creation performing a separate function limited to either physical or eschatological rest or both. All three schools agree that Christ fulfilled the sabbath law, just as He fulfilled the whole Law. They disagree as to whether Jesus affirmed the sabbath as it stood, changed its observance to the first day (Sunday), or suspended the mandate for a given day's observance.

Proponents of the first two theses, in addition to seeing a biblical charge to keep a day, also carefully indicate its spiritual and physical value in affording rest. Proponents of the third thesis generally accept its value for physical rest from labor, but will vary in assessing its spiritual implications.

The first school, which calls for a seventh day sabbath, is best represented in current literature by the work of Samuele Bacchiochi. Professor Bacchiochi has written two books titled: From Sabbath to Sunday: a Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity,<sup>2</sup> and Divine Rest for Human Restlessness: a Theological Study of the Good News of the Sabbath for Today.<sup>3</sup> His work emphasizes the biblical and historical evidence for the seventh day sabbath in Chris-

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<sup>2</sup> Samuele Bacciocchi, From Sabbath to Sunday: a Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity (Rome: the Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> Samuele Bacciocchi, Divine Rest for Human Restlessness: a Theological Study of the Good News of the Sabbath for Today (Berien Springs, MI: Tesar Printing Co.).



tianity, and the benefits to be derived from its observance. His second work interprets Jesus' acts of ministry on the sabbath as a great affirmation and corrective of the sabbath day. Although an Adventist himself, Professor Bacchiocchi does not forcefully enter the traditional eschatological concerns of some Sabbatarians who claim that Sunday worship has, or will, lead to apostasy.

This seventh day school relies heavily on historical interpretation of both the Gospels and church tradition to state the case for a seventh day sabbath. Professor Bacchiocchi adopts a thoroughly historical view of the Gospels when addressing Jesus' healing miracles performed on the sabbath. In doing so he determines that Christ's purpose for these sabbath miracles is primarily sabbath reform. "The next healing episode of the man with the withered hand...is the test case by which Christ begins His Sabbath reforms."<sup>4</sup> This focusing of Christ's work toward the institution of the sabbath does not correspond with such declarations as, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath" (Mk 2:27-28). The Gospels do not present Jesus as a prop for the sabbath, but the sabbath as a prop for Jesus. This passage from Mark suffices to show that the sabbath exists for either

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<sup>4</sup> Samuele Bacciocchi, From Sabbath to Sunday: a Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity, (Rome: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977) 30.

a humane or a divine purpose, or both. It has no intrinsic relevance apart from this purpose.

Representatives of the second school include Paul K. Jewett, The Lord's Day: a Theological Guide to the Christian Day of Worship,<sup>5</sup> and Roger T. Beckwith and Wilfred Stott, This is the Day: the Biblical Doctrine of the Christian Sunday in its Jewish and Early Church Setting.<sup>6</sup> These authors cite biblical and historical evidence which indicates that either Christ himself, or the apostles, confirmed the sabbath institution for the Church and moved the day of observance from the seventh day to the first day. The move is explained variously as a memorial to the resurrection of Christ and as signifying the Church's anticipation of eschatological rest in Christ.

The essence of first day, or Lord's Day, sabbatarianism holds that the fourth commandment is binding on Christians as a day of rest and worship. This school relies most heavily on the Exodus 20:8-11 sabbath, in which it sees sabbath as a universal commandment for all creation.<sup>7</sup> Neither Jewett, nor Beckwith and Stott, make use of the fourth commandment (5:12-15) to state a case for the Christian sabbath. Beckwith and Stott see the New

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<sup>5</sup> Paul K. Jewett, The Lord's Day: a Theological Guide to the Christian Day of Worship (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971).

<sup>6</sup> Roger T. Beckwith and Wilfred Stott, This is the Day: the Biblical Doctrine of the Christian Sunday in its Jewish and Early Church Setting (Greenwood, SC: the Attic Press, Inc., 1978).

<sup>7</sup> Beckwith and Stott, 9.

Testament writers endorsing the sabbath as a creation ordinance in keeping with the Hellenistic-Jewish interpretation of their time. They see Jesus opposing the Palestinian-Jewish interpretation which is more chrono- and ethnocentric.<sup>8</sup>

This study will contend for a more Deuteronomic interpretation among the Gospel writers, as well as a view of the sabbath as an institution peculiar to God's people. Patrick D. Miller, Jr., presents a thorough discussion of the sabbath in "The Human Sabbath: a Study in Theology."<sup>9</sup> As the title implies, he perceives the sabbath as primarily a humanitarian institution which embodies the second half of the Great Commandment, to love ones neighbor as ones self.<sup>10</sup> In this study I will trace the sabbath as primarily a God-ward institution, more related to the first part of the Decalogue (see chapter II below).

The third school is advocated, most recently, in a book titled From Sabbath to Lord's Day: a Biblical, His-

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<sup>8</sup> Beckwith and Stott, 11-12.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick D. Miller, Jr. "The Human Sabbath: a Study in Theology," The Princeton Theological Bulletin, v 6, n 2 (1985) 81-90.

<sup>10</sup> Miller, 84. Professor Miller observes a five-part structure in the sabbath commandment, however his explanation of these parts is not explicitly linked to the text, thus difficult to follow. Undeniably, the sabbath commandment promotes humanitarian effects; however, these effects are the means by which the sabbath is kept "...to the Lord your God" (Dt 5:14). Universal rest gives opportunity for universal worship. The structural weight still inclines toward the top of Decalogue (see chapter II below).



torical, and Theological Investigation.<sup>11</sup> This is a collection of essays edited by D. A. Carson. These works interpret the biblical and historical evidence to mean that Christ abrogated the sabbath as it appears in the Decalogue.

It is our intention, however, to challenge the view that gives biblical status to this Sunday tradition as binding for the individual or the church, and to challenge the theology that has been developed to give this support.<sup>12</sup>

Carson goes on at this point to emphasize that the contributors are not advocating a "gnostic" division of spiritual and physical rest in pursuit of a realized eschatology. He asserts that what God considered good for Israel is likewise good for us, but to be taken as instruction, not as command. The underlying assumption of Carson's disclaimer here seems to be the understanding that the sabbath is a creation institution because it is good for all.

At this point, it may be helpful to clarify the significance of the term commandment as it occurs in the related literature and applies to the Decalogue. Those who approach the sabbath commandment, and presumably the remainder of the Law, as merely instructive for the Christian, believe the sabbath is no longer a prerequisite for salvation. Those who see the sabbath commandment as binding approach the Law, to include the sabbath command-

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<sup>11</sup> D. A. Carson, ed., From Sabbath to Lord's Day: a Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Carson, 403.

ment, with the understanding that it never was effectual for salvation. Carson, in his conclusion, wants a Sunday very much, however, he does not want a sabbath commandment. Those who want a sabbath commandment often err also in finding more commandment than sabbath. Sabbath studies fall easily onto the trail of searching for what manner of obedience either befits faith or becomes legalism. But this type of search obscures the very logic of the concept of obedience, which demands a "to whom" and not a "for what" accounting.

The related literature features one more valuable viewpoint, that of Willy Rordorf. His work is titled Sunday: the History of the Day Rest and Worship in the Earliest Centuries of the Christian Church.<sup>13</sup> Rordorf, like the other authors surveyed, uses a predominantly historical approach to the Sunday, or sabbath, question.<sup>14</sup> And like Carson he arrives at the conclusion that Jesus dispensed with the sabbath commandment.

By instituting the day of rest God had wanted to give human beings a blessing, not a hardship. If the day of rest no longer spelt blessing but hardship, it had failed in its divine purpose, and as consequence rebellion against it or disregard of it was no sin.<sup>15</sup>

Rordorf's reasoning here follows the assumption that the sabbath commandment was, to begin with, purely for human

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<sup>13</sup> Willy Rordorf, Sunday: the History of the Day of Rest and Worship in the Earliest Centuries of the Christian Church, A. A. K. Graham, trans. (Philadelphia: the Westminster Press, 1968).

<sup>14</sup> Rordorf, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Rordorf, 63.

benefit, and that Christ justly rejected it on the grounds that man had made something of it which God had not intended it to be.

This analysis is inconsistent with Jesus' attitude toward the Law in general. A prime example would be his interpretation of the terms of adultery (cp. Mt 5:27-30, 19:3-9, Mk 10:2-12). There is no biblical grounding for the notion that God's Law, which reflects the will of God, becomes void for the simple reason that humanity chooses not to abide by it (cf. Mt 5:17-20 and Isa 55:11).

In a footnoted aside to the passage quoted above, Rordorf does make one significant point.

In some respects, therefore, Jesus has harked back to the original meaning of the sabbath as a day of rest introduced on social grounds for the sake of man. With prophetic zeal he has rejected the inclusion of the command to rest within man's duty to God, as it were for God's sake that man was to rest. This exactly fits in with Jesus' attitude toward the ritual law;....<sup>16</sup>

In brief, Rordorf has said: 1) Jesus viewed the sabbath in its original meaning; 2) this original meaning was based on human, physical rest; 3) the sabbath implied no duty to God. This study will concur with Rordorf's first point (see chapter III below). However, it will depart from his second conclusion, that the sabbath was promulgated solely on social grounds; and it will depart from

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<sup>16</sup> Rordorf, 63.



his conclusion that the sabbath implied no duty to God (see chapter II below).

Rordorf's insistence for a sabbath on social grounds conflicts with his later conclusion to the book.

While we view with skepticism the theological basis of Sunday as a day of rest (on historical grounds as well), we should wish all the more to emphasize the theological basis for Sunday as a day of worship.<sup>17</sup>

Rordorf develops the thesis that the sabbath commandment meant both rest and worship. He finds no theological justification to preserve the fourth commandment for a day of rest, but he clings to Sunday as a sanctified day of worship.

We should prefer to emphasize that worship take place on Sunday and on no other day of the week. We derive this requirement from the origins of the Christian observance of Sunday. We have attempted to establish the probability that it goes back to the meals of the risen Lord with his disciples after Easter. The first repetition of the Last Supper took place on Easter evening, that is to say on Sunday evening.... We can even say that because it is the will of Christ that the Lord's Supper be regularly held in the Christian Church, for this very reason, there is a Christian Sunday. .... At the same time as instituting the Lord's Supper afresh on Easter evening, Jesus has also instituted the day on which it should henceforth be celebrated: on Sunday. Put more epigrammatically this means: no Lord's Supper without Sunday, no Sunday without the Lord's Supper.<sup>18</sup>

Rordorf's promotion of Sunday is encouraging, but his historically based defense is guarded only by the most circumstantial of New Testament evidence, and not at all

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<sup>17</sup> Rordorf, 301.

<sup>18</sup> Rordorf, 303.



by the canonical fourth commandment. He has jettisoned the sabbath as much by Lutheran tradition, as by scriptural exegesis.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, Rordorf recognizes the sabbath dilemma before the Christian better than any other interpreter surveyed for this study. This dilemma rises in trying to effect simple obedience while under the pressure of grace. God's grace makes everything harder while rendering all things possible; it is the ultimate ingredient for injecting both firmness and freedom. When Rordorf confronts this dilemma, he, regretfully, chooses to weight a minor descant of the fourth commandment which is physical rest. When he substitutes this minor strain for the substance of the commandment, he must dismiss the whole sabbath ethic in its Old Testament context. Such an approach could stand as internally consistent if Rordorf did not then strive to rescue Sunday. At the heart of Rordorf's dilemma is an unreconciled approach to the authority of the Old Testament.

One valuable mark of Rordorf's New Testament interpretation is his factoring in the Lord's Supper. His historical marriage of the sacrament to Sunday is problematic; however, his linkage of communion to the sabbath offers some insight, although the historical argument is

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<sup>19</sup> Rordorf, 302. "Luther's interpretation of the sabbath commandment is similar to ours: just as we do, he wants to give up appealing to the Old Testament about rest as the justification for keeping Sunday, but he wants to go even further. He regards the fact that Sunday is the day of worship as...no longer binding."

a thin base (rather, see "John's Sabbath," ch. III below).

### Summary

The review of the related literature reveals that both first and seventh day sabbatarianism depend largely on historical arguments with inexplicit and inconclusive evidence in scripture to establish either. The proponents for a realized eschatology, on the other hand, argue almost exclusively from the New Testament, which keeps an even more comprehensive curfew than the Old Testament toward sabbath information. They do well to acknowledge the revolution in Christ, but do not adequately confront the authority of the Old Testament. They invariably slay both Saturday and Sunday, then try to revive the corpse of Sunday.

Each of these schools of thought cleaves to one pre-supposition. It being that the sabbath is, or was, a creation institution and derives its significance from that characteristic.

## Chapter II

### Sabbath in the Old Testament

This chapter will examine the sabbath in its Decalogue context, as well as the prophets' understanding of the sabbath.

#### In the Decalogue

The sabbath commandment in the Decalogue will be analyzed for both the varying content in its Exodus and Deuteronomic forms and for its context within the whole Decalogue.

The fourth commandment commands Israel to keep the seventh day holy as a sabbath to the Lord. Keeping the day holy requires cessation from work by all creatures, human and animal, in the Israelite community. This much is common to both the Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15 sabbath commandments. Beyond this, the commandments vary in two important facets.

The first variation appears in the substantiation. Exodus simply states that the seventh day is holy because on it God rested from his work in creation (Ex 20:11). The text of this commandment focuses on God's rest, not on Israel's rest. In fact, rest for Israel is only inferred by the injunction against work. The Deuteronomy passage gives the alternate justification for the sabbath as God's bringing Israel out of Egypt (Dt 5:15).

Herein lies the second variation, which is hinted above. The passage speaks nothing of God's rest, but

does more directly grant that Israel will have rest by not working: "...so that your male and female slave may have rest as well as you," (Dt 5:14c). In Deuteronomy, God institutes the sabbath in memorial to his act of redeeming Israel from the house of slavery in Egypt.

The Exodus passage does not speak of Israel's rest because the author pictures the nation to be in the wilderness. Israel is assembled at Sinai to become the people of Yahweh through covenant. There, in the presence of God, sabbath rest is not an ideal, but a reality. The issue of rest in the land, as a practice of the presence of God, is in the background and not germane to the situation at hand.

The Deuteronomic passage does speak of Israel's rest because the nation is pictured assembled on the plains of Moab, on the verge of inheriting the land of Canaan. Rest as a spiritual discipline will become, or should become, a reality provided the nation obeys Moses through whom God has spoken.

The focus of rest between these two passages is inverted. The Exodus author sees God at rest, whereas the author sees God as active on behalf of Israel in two ways: to accomplish redemption from slavery, and to give Israel the land so that Israel can enjoy rest.

Within the context of the whole Decalogue, the sabbath belongs to the first three commandments by instrumentation. Adherence to the sabbath commandment is in-



tended as the means by which Israel will keep the first three commandments: against other gods, idolatry, and taking the Lord's name in vain. This instrumentation is signaled in the phrase common to both, "But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God." (Ex 20:10a, Dt 5:14a) The sabbath observance is to be directed from Israel to God. This practiced focus on God will enable Israel to avoid the abominations proscribed in the first part of the Decalogue.

The sabbath is essentially a form of sacrifice, or worship. The fact that Israel must rest, or more precisely, cease from normal activities, is to grant opportunity for that worship. The literature surveyed for this study focuses on the sabbath as a divine gift of rest to Israel. Perhaps the sabbath is a gift, however, this can be true only in-so-far as every sacrifice to Yahweh was originally his gift to the worshiper. The phrase "...to the Lord your God," designates the sabbath as a type of sacrifice to Yahweh in acknowledgment that every other day was also borrowed from him. Every animal sacrifice acknowledged that the remainder of the flock came from God as well. Every tithe affirmed that the ninety percent remaining belonged to God. The sabbath is the Decalogue's self-contained sacrificial system, and perhaps to be seen as a potential alternative to the Levitical sacrificial system. The sabbath is a means of

consecrating ones self to God without intermediation of either priest or sacrifice.<sup>1</sup>

At this point, though, one note of caution must be observed. The sabbath is not typological, or prophetic, in the sense of the prevailing sacrificial system using animals. It accomplishes neither covering of, nor cleansing from, sin. It requires no intermediary of the priesthood for participation in the rite. It marks certain of God's past benefits to Israel, but certainly promises nothing as a result of obedience, as does the fifth commandment to honor parents. This sabbath to the Lord has the form of the sacrificial system, however, it lacks the power of that system, namely blood and promise.

The sabbath, as sacrifice, is an empty cup waiting for Christ to fill it. The time reserved for sabbath rest is not time directed toward rest, but "...to the Lord," in anticipation.

The related literature is universally quick to point out the practical value of the sabbath in the intrinsic physical and spiritual benefits of rest. Unfortunately, the text of the Decalogue does not comprehend these attributes as any reason for observing the sabbath. The

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<sup>1</sup> Beyond the context of the Decalogue, we see the understanding of the sabbath as primarily a cultic rite in the persistent reference to it as "my sabbath(s)" presented in the first person speech of Yahweh. See Ex 31:13, Lev 19:3,30, Ez 20:12ff. In fact this emphasis on "my sabbath," instead of "the sabbath," becomes the rule in the later texts. Thus, the understanding of the sabbath as an obligation of worship persists throughout the layers of the Old Testament.

day is Israel's duty to God by virtue of God's unilateral command. Rest is a ripening condition for worship. The day is presented as a form of sacrifice because its observance has the function of maintaining the manner of exclusive relationship set forth in the first three commandments.

### In the Prophets and Writings

This section will examine two passages where the sabbath receives prominent treatment, Jeremiah 17:19-27 and Isaiah 56:1-8. It will also consider a word from the writings in Nehemiah 13:15-22.

The prophets and writings expand the role of the sabbath, but they advance little beyond the Decalogue in defining the proper tenants of its observance. These parts of the canon draw on sabbath-keeping as a virtual synonym for the covenant. That is, obedience to the sabbath commandment serves both to define the people of God, and to insure the continuance of Israel's existence as the covenant people.

The passage at Jeremiah 17:19-27 speaks particularly to the belief that sabbath keeping will insure the continuance of the line of David. The essence of the pericope can be seen in verses 24-25.

But if you listen to me, says the Lord,  
and bring in no burden by the gates of this  
city on the sabbath day, but keep the sabbath  
day holy, and do no work on it, then there  
shall enter by the gates of this city kings who  
sit on the throne of David, . . . and this city  
shall be inhabited forever. (Jeremiah 17:24-  
25)



These verses do not indicate that keeping the sabbath has any impact on the standing of the Sinaitic covenant. The covenant in mind here is not from Sinai but from David (see 2 Samuel 7:10-11). The lineage of this covenant is properly traced back to Abraham in the promise to him in Genesis 17:4-8. Verse 6 says "And I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you."

The important point for Jeremiah is that sabbath-keeping is a critical issue affecting the Abrahamic covenant, and thus stands above the events at Sinai as an obligation to the whole nation of Israel.

Jeremiah also adds to the understanding of sabbath-keeping by mentioning a prohibition against burden bearing on the sabbath, as well as one against work.

The passage at Isaiah 56:1-8 also expands the role of the sabbath. This prophet declares that sabbath-keeping is a means for those who were formerly excluded from the covenant, foreigners and eunuchs, to join the covenant community as full members.

"...all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant--these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer." (Isaiah 56:6b-7a)

The covenant which Isaiah has in mind is probably drawn from the legislation in Deuteronomy 23:1-7.

Seeing that Jeremiah's point of reference rests in the Davidic/Abrahamic covenant, and that Isaiah looks to

the Mosaic legislation gives some hesitation to finding a synthesis between the two. However, a synthesis does exist in the two prophets' views of the sabbath. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah see sabbath-keeping as the singular means for maintaining a covenant relationship with God.

Isaiah does not give any more information about the tenants of sabbath-keeping than does Jeremiah. However, both prophets give a clear indication of the locus of sabbath observance. They each envision the sabbath centered around Jerusalem, though in different ways. Jeremiah sees the inviolability of Jerusalem dependent on sabbath-keeping. Isaiah sees sabbath-keeping as the grounds for populating Jerusalem, or "...my holy mountain," and "...my house of prayer." (Isa. 56:7). This Zion centered sabbath teaching in the prophets indicates their adherence to the Deuteronomic theology, and in all likelihood, the Deuteronomic view of sabbath which features the redeeming activity of God.

Even so, the prophetic vision of the sabbath draws the day out of the Law of Moses and moves it to a pinnacle which overshadows the entire Law as a means of spiritual qualification for citizenry in the ideal Israel. Gerhard von Rad has observed of the exilic community, which these prophets addressed:

Thus it was in the Exile that the Sabbath and circumcision won a status confessionis which they afterwards preserved for all time.<sup>2</sup>

Both [Sabbath and circumcision] were now regarded as "signs of the covenant," and their observance was decisive as showing that one belonged to Jahweh and his people.<sup>3</sup>

In this we see that the sabbath becomes more mark than law by the end of the Old Testament.

This status is consonant with its reiteration at the end of the Lord's Sinaitic discourse in Exodus 31:12-17, which although based in creation, also agrees with the Deuteronomic posture that the sabbath connotes a particular sign of his people.

You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. (Ex 31:13)

It is most interesting that this passage immediately precedes one of the most infamous incidents of the wilderness experience. The Israelites inaugurate the worship of the golden calf. Aaron said, "'Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.' ...and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to revel." (Ex 32:5b, 6b) This juxtaposition surely contains many implications, but one is certain. We see here an image of contrasted worship events which discriminates between the acceptable worship commanded by God (the sabbath) and the unacceptable, syn-

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<sup>2</sup> Gerhard von Rad, Old Testament Theology, vol. I, D. M. G. Stalker, trans. (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, Ltd., 1962) 79.

<sup>3</sup> Von Rad, 84.

cretistic worship devised from below by human beings (the golden calf).<sup>4</sup>

At this point (Ex 31:12-17) a convergence of viewpoints between Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Isaiah must be noted. Although Exodus still maintains the creation origin, the author definitely fixes the purpose of the sabbath as a mark of the people of God. This agrees with Deuteronomy's exclusive acknowledgment of the sabbath as a redemption memorial, and Isaiah's use of the sabbath as a defining mark of the citizens of Zion.

#### Summary

The Old Testament witnesses indicate two important points about the sabbath. Firstly, the sabbath functions as a means of worship, being a form of sacrifice. Secondly, the sabbath is an exclusive institution belonging to the people of God. It is not effective, even as a creation ordinance, for those outside a covenantal relationship with God. Anyone who keeps sabbath enters such relationship by definition.

It is also helpful to reiterate here that the Deuteronomic version of the sabbath emerges as the dominant motif of the sabbath commandment. This comes apparent in two ways. Firstly, the whole of the Old Testament, and particularly the prophets, have the theological

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<sup>4</sup> It is notable at this point that the Israelites are held liable for judgment for this festival even before Moses has descended the mountain with the Law. The arrangement presupposes the Israelite's prior knowledge of, and accountability to, the sabbath commandment (cf. Ex 16:23)♦.



vision of God as actively working toward the redemption of Israel, and in some cases the gentiles also. This coheres with the Deuteronomic clause which substantiates the commandment with God's rescue of Israel from Egypt.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, the prophets state their concern for, and the consequences of, sabbath-breaking around the precincts of Jerusalem. Deuteronomy's sabbath commandment does not fix the sabbath to Zion. However, the prophets derive this synthesis from Deuteronomy's otherwise substantial concern for consolidated worship (Dt 12:8-27). Sabbath rest is obtained as the result of obedient and acceptable worship.

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<sup>5</sup> This study will continue to focus on the Deuteronomic sabbath because it emerges as the Old Testament's primary model, and as such, it informs the dominant New Testament understanding. The harmony of the Exodus and sabbaths is not crucial to this study. However, because the question is begged, two possibilities may be offered. Both of these possibilities assume a narrative framework for the Pentateuch. The first possibility is that God ceased his rest for the work of recreation as a result of the fall in Genesis 3. The second possibility is that God ceased his rest for working the re-redemption of Israel as a result of the apostacy in Exodus 32:7-35. The second possibility is best because the sabbath injunction immediately precedes this passage (Ex 31:12-17). This iteration of the sabbath marks it as a sign of the covenant, and grounds it again in creation. Immediately after this we see the apostacy, the destruction of the tablets, then the reconstruction of them and the long march to the plains of Moab. But neither God, nor Israel share any mutual rest again in the Old Testament (cf. 2 Chron 36:21).

### Chapter III

#### Sabbath in the New Testament

This chapter will describe the sabbath interpretations in first century Palestinian Judaism. It will then examine the alternative views expressed in the Synoptic and Johanne traditions, and in the epistle to the Hebrews. The summary will present a synthesis of the New Testament sabbath theology.

#### The Sabbath of Judaism

This section will examine the sabbath theology of the Jews of the first century. The two groups of Jews confronting Jesus in the Gospels are the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Of these two, the Pharisees fight hardest against Jesus' sabbath provocations. Therefore, it will be necessary to assess the Pharisaic understanding of sabbath because it serves as the typical foil throughout the Gospels for Jesus' own interpretation. The Sadducees' position will also be examined. It differed from the Pharisaic in practice. However, both parties held theological suppositions about sabbath rest which united them in disagreement with Jesus.

The Pharisees diverged with the Sadducees in their eschatology and application of the Torah. The Pharisees had established a "fence around the Law" with their tradition of the elders (cf. Mt 15:2). This included the keeping of the ritual purity laws throughout the land, not only in the Jerusalem temple itself. They also believed in the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees did

not recognize the fence around the Law and they applied the ritual purity laws only to the Jerusalem temple precincts. Neither did the Sadducees believe in the resurrection of the dead.<sup>1</sup>

The implications for sabbath differences appear wide at a glance. The Sadducees could apply no future eschatological significance to the sabbath because they were living their eschatology. The Pharisees saw the sabbath as both sign and promise of the age to come. And if any Sadducee might leave Jerusalem, he would incur the same Pharisaic reproach dealt to Jesus for violating the tradition of the elders.

Still, the Sadducees and the Pharisees held two key theological presuppositions in common which molded their sabbath thinking. Both parties believed that the Torah was God's consummate revelation.<sup>2</sup> They also believed that God was at rest with his creation (cf. Ge 2:1-3).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Neusner, Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 56-7.

Emil Schurer, The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ, vol. 3, revised english edition. Matthew Black, ed., (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979) 407-8.

<sup>2</sup> John L. McKenzie, A Theology of the Old Testament (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Books, Inc., 1976) 324-5. Fr. McKenzie applies the term "realized eschatology," with appropriate qualifications, to Pharisaic religion.

<sup>3</sup> Marten Hengel, Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period, 2 vols., John Bowden, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974) 169-175. After examining the impact of Alexandrian Hellenism on Pharisaism with its amalgum of Wisdom and Torah, Hengel notes, "We must therefore ask whether this understanding of the Law does not involve a transformation of Old Testament conceptions of the historical revelation of God to his people,..."(174). Hengel allows that Pharisaism was not subducted to Hellenism's pre-occupation with Wisdom



Whether this supposition was the result of Hellenistic influence may be debatable, however, the fact that it existed is attested to in John's first sabbath controversy (Jn 5:17). Here, Jesus clearly reacts against the notion that God is recumbent on the sabbath, or since creation.<sup>4</sup>

Hence, the Judaic view of the Torah, as the consummate divine revelation, can only be described as either prejosianic, or subjosianic if one prefers, in that it is incapable of responding to revelation. It can accept a variety of interpretations (either Pharisaic or Sadducaic), but it cannot bow to the prophetic summons, "Thus saith the Lord." It can accommodate salvation history, but it cannot relinquish the status quo. Certainly this is why Jesus cited them as sclerotic (cf. Mk 10:5).

The Judaic theology of the sabbath, as grounded in the first creation account (Ge 2:1-3), might not be accurately termed "realized eschatology," especially in the case of the Pharisees who looked forward to the resurrection. However, this theology did impair their ability to perceive the age. By supposing that the sabbath commandment functioned primarily to reveal a divinely appointed

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(170), but held out the Torah as preeminently authoritative. With the help of Hengel's analysis, however, I believe that Hellenism's influence pushed Pharisaic Judaism toward a bias for the sabbath material in Genesis 2:1-3, and Exodus 20 and 31, thus rendering a picture of God at rest with his creation.

<sup>4</sup> The fact that Jesus heals on the sabbath discounts divine rest (per Pharisaic norm) on the sabbath. The phrase, in Jn 5:17, "until now" indicates this work has been continuing for some time. (The phrase "until now" appears in the Greek NT, but not in the NRSV, which is otherwise the standard reference for this paper.)

order for the natural world, they found in it reason for the physical rest of humans and animals, and an occasion for demonstrating human obedience and worthiness. The sabbath as the occasion for divine intervention became the realm of speculative eschatology and hence less relevant to the practicing community. And the sabbath as the circumstance for divine intervention became dependent upon human rest and worthiness. We see here a very subtle reduction in the understanding of God's transcendence. He is supposed to be in some way dependent upon his created order to perform his will.

Unlike their forbearer, Josiah (2 Kg 22:11-13), the Jews who met God's direct revelation in Jesus Christ were unable to respond with repentance and supplication, or inquiry. Their theology of the Torah as the final and highest revelation had something to do with this. But the Gospel writers are careful to explain that the Jews were incapable of correctly interpreting even the Torah (cf. Mk 10:5 and Mt 19:8; Mk 12:24-26 and Mt 22:29).

This exegetical handicap, manifest in rejecting revelation, stemmed from their sabbath theology. They were perfectly willing to anticipate rest from God, but they were equally unwilling to experience redemption in order to receive it. Or rather, they supposed that the historical Exodus, with the giving of the Law, had provided all the redemption they needed. They subliminally denied that redemption is the necessary antecedent of rest. Yet, this is exactly how the sabbath commandment reads:

that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. (Dt 5:15)

God has made redemption the true signal for rest. Rest cannot be revealed, or granted, from within the created order.

Human rest always subsequent to divine rest. God rested, and not the creation, at the end of six days labor. Whether we adopt the theology of God's rest continuing (cf. Hb 3:1-4:13), or interrupted (see note 5, ch II above), is not crucial. It is crucial to see that human rest hinges upon divine action. And it is always through action, creation or redemption, that God takes up his own rest (Ge 2:2, Jn 19:30, Hb 1:3b). Rest is an attribute of the divine image. The creation is utterly passive in the matter. It can neither rest, nor not rest. Humanity may experience rest only by virtue of bearing the image of God.

The context of Deuteronomy also testifies that the relying on the redemption of a people long past is vain. We see in the prologue of the book that Israel is stationed on the Plains of Moab (Dt 1:5) and is a generation removed from Sinai (Dt 1:35, 39). Yet, Moses calls the members of this new generation into account for the experience of Sinai by repeating the Decalogue and imposing the covenant upon them (Dt 5:24) as though they were there.

The Judaic interpreters of Jesus' time relied on an interpretation which allowed them to substitute both the natural order and the text of an historical event for the personal experience of redemption, and resultant sabbath rest.

#### The Rest of the Promise

The title of this section obviously conveys a double meaning. The first rest in view is that rest secured, or realized, by the extant history of salvation, even through the first advent of Christ. The second rest in view is that rest which is invoked for us by hope in the fullness of the kingdom of God set to appear at the end of the age.

The church finds itself in a position not wholly unlike that of first century Israel. The church is exposed to many of the same dangerous tendencies in interpretation that blinded Pharisaism. The New Testament writers overcame that danger to give us the rest of the promise-- now to see how they did it.

Noting thus far that the Old Testament's internal evidence favors the Deuteronomic sabbath, and that Judaism fixed on the Exodus sabbath, tempts one to summarily conclude that: the Jews obviously misconstrued the whole character of the rest imposed by the sabbath commandment; and, the New Testament writers bore witness to the pure, Hebraic, Old Testament faith whereas the Jews corrupted it through isogetical hermeneutics. However,



these charges are not true. The Jews were wrong, but not for the easy reasons (see page 30 above).

Beginning with the second point, the New Testament itself does not present a unified field of sabbath interpretation. One cannot say simply that the Pharisees chose "P" and the Apostles chose "D" so the first is wrong and the second right. Both traditions are Scriptural and both have their significant advocates in the New Testament. The Gospel writers all lean toward the Deuteronomic sabbath, however, each one sees Christ interact a little differently even with that standard. The writer to the Hebrews, on the other hand, is concerned solely with the Exodus tradition and explains Christ as adroitly through the Sinaitic sabbath as the Gospel writers do through the Moabitic tradition. These positions will be explained in detail in the following two sections. But it must be stated here that even a compartmentalized approach to Scripture did not necessarily yield Pharisaism.

Neither were the Pharisees victimized by the influences of Hellenism, in preferring the creation versus the redemption sabbath. For even the Gospel writers, who claim to exclusively promote the faith of the fathers (cf. Mt 8:11, Lk 16:31, Jn 8:39-40), also willingly dialogue with the Hellenistic mind. A good example would be John's use of light and dark, and the word become flesh. The true Hebraic faith of the Old Testament, for the Gospel writers, did not hang on replicating every last

category of Israelite thought, or excluding every foreign category. Thus, the Jews cannot be held culpable for being aware of the Greeks' existence and reacting to it.

The first charge leveled above, that Judaism misconstrued the meaning of rest in the Old Testament, is likewise baseless. Even though the tradition of the elders interpreted a quite literal demand for physical rest, it must be admitted that the first century Jew and Christian worked with the same definition of rest. They both saw rest as an ideal state of mental and physical release from burden and strife.

The Christian expression of this definition is best revealed in Matthew 11:28-30.

Come to me all you that are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Mt 11:28-29)

This passage forms the introduction to Matthew's direct sabbath teaching in 11:28-12:14. One can then see that this sabbath discussion introduces a whole section of soteriological and Christological pericopes which halt abruptly at the ominous death of John the Baptist (Mt 14:1-12). This can signal nothing other than a definitive rejection of the offer of repentance (Mt 3:2), and that rest which Christ offered (11:28-30).

The significance for this study is that the Jews understood the nature of the rest offered. The best Scriptural evidence for this comes from the Septuagint (LXX). The Hebrew hexateuch employs three separate terms, which

the English versions typically translate alike as "rest," in the passages most central to sabbath understanding. These terms for rest appear in: Genesis 2:3 (shabbath; ceasing from doing something), Exodus 20:11 and Deuteronomy 5:14 (nuch; rest from labor, an image of recumbency as it appears in other passages), and Joshua 11:23 (shaqat; respite from war, and so throughout Judges also). The LXX uses katapauo for all three Hebrew terms in the cited passages. One exception appears in Deuteronomy 5:11 where the Greek term is anapauo for nuch rather than katapauo as used in Exodus 20:11. (Matthew 11:28 follows Deuteronomy in preferring anapauo. Hebrews, chapter 4, follows Exodus in preferring katapauo.)

The LXX translators chose to consolidate these terms of rest into one semantic field, thereby broadening and deepening the concept sabbath rest. Because this translation was accomplished by Jews during the intertestamental period,<sup>5</sup> one can be confident that the New Testament writers received their understanding of rest from the Judaic sources, and are not advocating a new or alien paradigm when they speak of rest.

Seeing all this agreement upon the meaning of the sabbath and its central component, rest, it seems ironic that the Gospels publish any sabbath controversies. After all, none of the Gospel writers, or any other New Testament author, abolishes the sabbath day outright (see

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<sup>5</sup> Hengel, vol. I, pp. 69-70.

pp. 4-5 above). There is some disagreement between Jesus and the Pharisees as to the priorities of the sabbath (Mt 12:8, Mk 2:27-28, Lk 6:5). However, both would concede that the chief end of the sabbath is rest.

### The Synoptic Sabbath

In addition to agreeing on the purpose of the sabbath as rest, they would also agree on the nature of that rest. And yet, the sabbath controversies in each Gospel account turn violent. The epilogue to each sabbath pericope tells the reader early on that a duel to the death will occur between Jesus and the Pharisees (Mt 12:14, Mk 3:6, Lk 6:11, Jn 5:18). Thus, the sabbath dispute is inextricably linked to the passion narrative across all Gospel traditions. Christ's other defiant act is the cleansing of the temple. This incident also provokes the authorities to seek his death (Jn 2:19-21, Mt 21:15, Mk 11:18, Lk 19:47). Jesus uses the signs of sabbath and temple to make his way straight to the cross.

The proceeding sections will examine these passages from Matthew and Mark. Luke need not be included because Matthew and Mark publish the fullest accounts. Luke edits down from both Matthew and Mark in both his sabbath and temple pericopes (Lk 6:1-5, 19:45-48).

John's sabbath and temple pericopes will be examined separately because their structural arrangement reveals a different emphasis in soteriology and hence sabbath theology. Also John's Gospel uses different Baptist material to introduce and support that material.



Entreaty to Rest. (Mt 3:1-3, 4:12-13, 11:7-14:12)

The advent of John the Baptist with his call for repentance opens the final offensive of God's war upon sin. Satan's rapid counter offensive fails in the wilderness temptation of Christ (Mt 4:1-11, Mk 1:12-13, Lk 4:1-13). The forces of humankind choose the sabbath (Mt 12:10, Mk 3:2, Lk 6:7) on which to conduct their first defence against the Gospel.

This emotive language and imaging reads out of place in an analytical study; however it agrees with the literary techniques of the Gospel narratives themselves. And it gets quickly to the point of the Synoptics, which is, "Repent!" This is particularly true of Matthew who has made John the Baptist's message concomitant to his understanding of the sabbath.

Each Synoptic introduces Christ's ministry with John the Baptist's work. Each Synoptic specifies this work as a call to repentance. Matthew alone draws "Repent!" out of John's mouth as an imperative command (Mt 3:2). We next hear of John in a passive reference to his imprisonment. Jesus uses the to depart from Nazareth (4:12-13). John fades again until he sends a deputation from prison to Christ in chapter 11. Here, Jesus memorializes John's ministry (11:7-18), reproaches unrepentant cities (11:20-24), and commences his sabbath teaching, first by word (11:25-30), then by deed (12:1-14).

The section which follows (12:15-13:53) contains a series of lessons all designed to demonstrate who does

and who does not comprehend the Gospel, and thus qualify for the kingdom of heaven. Notably this section contains the passage which defines the true family of Jesus (12:46-50) and ends with the Jesus' return to, and rejection from, Nazareth (12:54-58, cf. 4:12-13). The return to Nazareth recalls the earlier imprisonment of John, and introduces his execution (14:1-12). The execution of John, along with the intent to kill Jesus (12:14), signals a definitive rejection of the entreaty to repentance (3:1-3, 11:20f.) and the sabbath rest which could have come from repentance and fellowship.

The preceding sketch gives us the essentials of Matthew's sabbath theology.<sup>6</sup> One must repent; or, change ones mind to acknowledge the Messiaship of Jesus Christ (11:25-27). This repentance in itself is a gift received as a result of divine initiative in revealing Jesus Christ.

At that time Jesus said, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants (11:25).

To turn toward Jesus, and do his will, familially binds one to him (12:50). Such a relationship with Jesus se-

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<sup>6</sup> One has only to compare Matthew's arrangement of the pericopes in this section with the parallels in Mark and Luke to see that he has been extremely intentional about linking the subjects of repentance and relationship to sabbath. Mark's sabbath controversy (2:23-3:6) does not tie in with the Baptist's message of repentance, and the issue of relationship in the surrounding material is subordinate to Jesus' demonstrations of power. Luke (6:1-10) follows Mark for the most part, with less immediate emphasis on power, more on teaching (6:12-26). Neither Luke nor Mark isolate a sabbath agenda comparable to Matthew's.

cures sabbath rest irrespective of chronological circumstance (12:3-4, 5).<sup>7</sup> Thus Matthew views sabbath rest as a condition contingent upon repentance and active (obedient) fellowship with Christ, subsequent to an intentional, and personal, divine revelation of just whom Jesus Christ is.

Unrest in the Temple. (Mark 11:15-19)

After seeing Matthew's very careful definition of the sabbath, and Mark and Luke's comparative retirement of the subject (see note 6), one should be able to relax and except Matthew's courtesy at face value. However, Mark has revealed something of a catch in his temple pericope (11:15-19), which must be dealt with. Mark tells us that Jesus would not allow a burden to be carried through the temple.

This information bears scrutiny for two reasons. It is unique in the Gospels; and it has the character of being a sabbath reference, with antecedents such as Jeremiah 17:19-27 and Nehemiah 13:15. In these Old Testament passages, the one who speaks for Yahweh places strictures against carrying any burden of commerce into Jerusalem on the sabbath.<sup>8</sup> The temple cleansing peri-

<sup>7</sup> The image of David and his companions in Matthew 12:3-4 is a direct reference to Jesus and his disciples in the this passage. David as type for Christ is well attested in this section of Matthew by 12:23, but also in the Gospel as whole via 1:6, 20, 9:27, 15:22, 21:9, etc. This also holds true for Mark (10:47-48, 12:10), although to a lesser extent.

<sup>8</sup> Mark's text does not mirror the vocabulary of either the Jeremiah, nor the Nehemiah, text in the LXX. However, the concept of a ban on commercial traffic on the sabbath is consistent with both. This textual dis-



copies in their present form are not explicit sabbath day controversies, even though they are set during feast time. Mark's burden comment, however, bears witness that an earlier tradition quite likely used the temple cleansing as component of the sabbath polemic.

Other evidence for the temple's role in the sabbath debate comes from a comparison of Mark's sabbath pericope (Mk 2:23-28) with Matthew's (Mt 12:1-8). These agree entirely except that Matthew has inserted a comment about the priests in the temple (12:5) which is not found in Mark. Then we see that Matthew omits the burden comment from his temple pericope (Mt 21:12-17). Thus, it becomes important to assess the relationship of the temple to the sabbath debate.

By detaching the temple cleansing from specific reference to a sabbath day, both Matthew and Mark agree to a reduction of the chronocentric sabbath, at least in the environs of the temple. However, by inserting the remark about the priests' guiltless sabbath breaking in the temple, and by excluding the burden comment, Matthew overtly signals a reclamma to Mark. Mark's burden comment pictures Jesus as a sabbath enforcer, even in, or especially in, the temple. The burden prohibition, as it stands, even appears to contradict Mark's own previous sabbath

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simulation, along with the apparent anomaly of such a passage being attributed to Christ, after his other sabbath stands, leads me to accept the burden remark as quite historical.



interpretation using of David and his companions (2:25-26) (see note 7 above).

The raw data suggests that the first Christians also struggled with the question of Jesus' disposition toward the sabbath commandment. Does this raw data, which has entered canonical shape of the Gospels, offer their resolution, or just hand off the debate to us?

One possible answer is to say that where Mark is tentative, Matthew is firm (see p. 36 above). In the course of time the church refined its sabbath theology and Matthew is authoritative. This solution, though, distorts the canonical method by assuming that later is always better, even within the canon, thus discounting a portion of the Scriptures.

No, we should be grateful to Mark for catching us with the burden comment. It serves to prevent us from reducing Jesus to a sabbath lawgiver (for or against), and forces us to focus on his person and authority. The sabbath, as applied to the temple pericope, has been made to serve the typology of the temple, which speaks of Christ.

The disagreement between Matthew and Mark over the role and function of the sabbath in the temple precincts cannot be adroitly compared because Matthew and Mark stand in separate spheres. Matthew believes that the temple space is above all holy, thus, all (appropriate) activity is sanctified in the temple and the sabbath cannot be transgressed there at any time. Mark, by removing

the burden remark from its traditional sabbath day context, indicates that all time is sanctified in the temple, thus, activity which breaks the sabbath is inappropriate at any time in the temple. He, or she, who hopes to abide literally by both Matthew and Mark, when going to the temple will be condemned either way.

Fortunately, the sabbath is not the primary point at all for either author. The temple pericope in all Gospels, except perhaps Luke, emphasizes Jesus as the new temple. This does not come to the fore in the Synoptics until the trial of Jesus (Mk 14:59, Mt 26:61, 27:40, cf. Jn 2:21), although, Matthew includes the preparatory remark, "I tell you something greater than the temple is here," (12:6) in his sabbath pericope.<sup>9</sup>

The crucial point is this: Matthew and Mark both envision the sabbath as a perpetual condition in and about the temple. They regard the temple as a type for Christ himself. Thus, coming into the presence of Christ fulfills the sabbath commandment. And, by the way Matthew features the sabbath pericope, we know that repentance<sup>10</sup> is a prerequisite for coming into Christ's presence. Mark does not contradict this point. Matthew assumes a preexisting covenantal separation and sets

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<sup>9</sup> It is interesting that Luke, being among the Synoptics, does not include the temple charge in his trial and passion narrative. It also may be significant that where this charge appears in Mark and Matthew the temple typology is already presupposed.

<sup>10</sup> The "repentance" which Matthew stipulates throughout 11:7-13:58 mentions nothing about modes of human conduct. The act of repentance is entirely caught up with recognizing the person and work of Jesus Christ.

forth the conditions for restoration; that restored state has the character of sabbath rest.

When Jesus' enemies lost their attempt at a separate peace in the defence of the sabbath day, they retreated to the temple, where the time was always opportune (cf. Lk 4:13). They seized a hollow victory there, and lost all at the empty tomb.

### John's Sabbath

John's sabbath differs from Matthew's in that John's Baptist does not issue the call to repentance; repentance is not a specified precondition for sabbath rest in John's Gospel. John also uses a different structure to present a different metaphor. Yet, John agrees substantially with Matthew, or perhaps more with Mark, about the sabbath. John's most important addition is the linkage of the eucharist to the sabbath.

John's Gospel, as it pertains to the sabbath, begins with one wedding and one divorce. There is no preexisting fracture of fealty by human hands, but rather an immediate demand for marital fidelity. Christ appears in order to establish the conditions for the marriage. First, he turns water into wine at Cana of Galilee (2:1-11), thus wedding his disciples to himself (2:11), the wine being portentous of his shed blood. Then, he divorces (2:23-25) those who cling to the old order by cleansing the temple (2:13-22).<sup>11</sup> The struggle for the

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<sup>11</sup> The mechanics of temple cleansing in John share much in common with both Matthew and Mark. He even makes the typology of the temple explicit (2:21). However, the



minds of the next generation begins with the requirement for new birth stated to Nicodemus in the next scene (3:3).<sup>12</sup> These acts demarcate the sectors of light and dark which John has already introduced.

All of this serves John's sabbath theology. Matthew, through the temple, carefully made a case for all time henceforth being sabbath time. John shuns any statement about time, and subordinates the sabbath to the sign of the eucharist and the image of marriage. The subordinating of the sabbath is effected in 7:19-24 where Jesus declares the sign of circumcision as preeminent to the sabbath. That is, it is necessary to circumcise on the sabbath in order to keep the Law of Moses, and Jesus clearly asserts that his act of healing the whole body surpasses the rite of circumcision (7:23).

The healing referred to in chapter 7 has its antecedent in chapter 5 where Jesus heals the man by the pool (5:2-9). This healing incident leads to the discussion of who will recognize Jesus as the son of God (5:16-29). This recognition is the criterion for eternal life,

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structure of John's Gospel de-emphasizes the incident as a sabbath commentary. John makes no use of the burden remark, or any other reference to the temple in his sabbath pericopes which follow. In the temple scene of chapter 7, John subordinates the charge of sabbath breaking (7:19-24) to a comparison between the authority of Moses and the authority of Jesus.

<sup>12</sup> John's affinity to Mark comes as he presents true sabbath as the departure from the old order. We see Mark anticipating this view by his placing the question about fasting from John's disciples (2:18-22) immediately before his sabbath pericope (2:23-3:6). Jesus thus contrasts old and new wine, etc. Matthew, as already discussed, has taken different route with the Baptist by distancing his fasting pericope (9:14-17) from the sabbath.



much as Matthew's sabbath section holds that seeing Jesus as the Messiah, gives entry into the kingdom of God. Matthew gives the added stipulation of repentance, as stated above. John requires no repentance; however, John is not without an added condition of his own.

Immediately after this sabbath confrontation, John inserts the feeding of the five thousand (6:1-15). This event relates to the previous dispute with the Jews by contrast. The Jews in Jerusalem refused to acknowledge the divine origin and authority of Jesus regardless of any sign (5:43). The crowds of the hinterland, though, attempt to make him king (6:15). Unfortunately, they do so not on the basis of who he is (as revealed by the signs), but on the basis of their own desire (6:26). Jesus' power is being roundly ignored.

John resolves the problem by giving the eucharist as the only terms on which Jesus accepts a person. "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." (6:53) This statement sums up what is required of the true followers of Jesus Christ. Before we dismiss this observation as a sacerdotal contrivance, it must be noted that both those who hated Jesus (5:18) and those who were fascinated by him (6:41-42) were equally unprepared, hence unworthy, in attitude to partake of his blood and body. So the substance here is not a rite but judgment. He who judges the Son, for his own purposes whether they appear

cruel or noble, is condemned by Moses (5:44-46). He whom the Son judges receives eternal life (5:25-29).

### Gospel Summary

The preceding analysis of the Gospels reveals that:

- 1) the condition of sabbath rest hinges upon a proper relationship to Jesus Christ; a) Matthew regards human repentance (active) in the face of divine revelation (active) as essential to entering that relationship; b) John regards human acceptance (passive) of divine judgment (active), symbolized by the eucharist, as essential to entering that relationship; 2) all Gospel witnesses adopt the Deuteronomic priorities for the sabbath; a) sabbath rest is a condition wrought by active divine intervention; b) true sabbath observance is isolated to the precincts of Zion; 3) The Gospel writers uniformly resist, or at least disregard, the sabbath as a creation order; a) they reject the chronocentric sabbath, expressed in a literal seven day cycle, especially in the environs of the temple; b) they ascribe sabbath rest only to the true followers of Jesus Christ, and not to the world at large.

It should also be reiterated that the Gospel writers do not offer any other casuistry than repentance and submission to the judgment of Christ as sabbath fulfillment. Even this repentance has no horizontal ethical dimension as Matthew presents it (see note 10 above). The pre-eminence of Christ as judge (Lord) of the sabbath precludes the imposition of any further legislation, unless it

would come from Christ himself, and the Gospel writers fall silent at that point.

As a fitting epilogue to this section, some attention should be given to Mark's declaration, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath;" (2:27). It too often becomes the proof text for both the libertine and the creation order enthusiast. First, to the libertine: nothing in the Scriptures suggests that the sabbath, be it a day or an epoch, can be observed in anyway a human being chooses. Its method of observance is just as much divinely mandated in the Gospels as it is in the Pentateuch. Sabbath-keeping is of no private interpretation. Next, to the creation sabbatarian: nothing in the Scriptures suggests that one day of physical rest in seven is just intrinsically good for a person because that's the way God made everything. Whatever human good comes from the sabbath, comes by way of promise and commandment. In Christ, the New Testament grants a sabbath from chronic human erring into shades of self-indulgence, and not a license to err more.

### Hebrews

The epistle to the Hebrews must now be assessed in light of the Gospel position because the writer to the Hebrews deals extensively with the sabbath, and solely from the Exodus/Creation perspective at that.

The writer accepts the theological construct that God's rest has continued from "...the foundation of the world"(4:3b). However, he also invokes a subsequent rest

of God in picturing Christ as the High Priest who has finished his work. "When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high," (1:3b). The rest of God, though, is a mystery beyond the scope of this study, except where that rest touches humanity, which is in the sabbath.

Hebrews makes three important points about sabbath rest. Firstly, that the opportunity for it is extant and remains so. Secondly, the state of rest is not fixed to a day but to an object of inheritance, the land of Canaan. Thirdly, the sought after state of rest is contrasted with the state of rebellion, or sin.

Hebrews 4:9, "...a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God;" means that the sabbath rest is offered in the present age as a result of Christ's sacrifice. Two observations support this. One, the tenor of the whole exhortation in 3:7-4:13 is for the living reader to enter in the rest being offered. This reader's opportunity is being contrasted with the previously living people of Israel's history who rejected the offer of rest. And two, the whole epistle, from the introduction, focuses upon the ramifications of Christ's first coming, not his second. This does not mean that the writer denies an eschatological state of rest; he fully expects one (4:14). However, the opportunity of entering that end-state of rest depends upon the reader's reaction now.

The terms sabbath and rest in Hebrews are an umbrella for the entire sabbatical system of the Old Testa-



ment. The rest offered by the inheritance of the land does not provide for the rest of the land, but for the people. Thus, the author of Hebrews has in mind one rubric under which all Old Testament sabbatical images fall. The Old Testament sabbath, or rest, in Hebrews is a concrete and present reality only in Christ; otherwise, it is a cosmological and chronological abstraction.

Hebrews' most important contribution to understanding sabbath appears in the defining of sabbath by its theological antithesis. The opposite of sabbath is rebellion, or sin. Being both an act and a condition, sin is the sting of death (cf. 1 Cor 15:56) in separation from God, but sabbath rest is the comfort derived from life in Christ.

#### New Testament Summary

The New Testament writers, as a whole, agree on a relational interpretation of the sabbath. The sabbath of the New Testament is not a free-standing proposition ensuing from either the Creation or the Exodus. The role of the sabbath is to reference that condition of rest which accompanies personal fellowship with God in Jesus Christ.

The New Testament sabbath has but one ethical demand, which is obedience to Christ. This obedience is manifest in knowing the historical Jesus Christ as: Messiah (i.e. King, son of David) (per Matthew), Son of God (per John), High Priest (per Hebrews). The keeping of one day over another is never invoked as a tenant of obe-

dience. However, the keeping of a day is not expressly revoked by the authors examined.

The New Testament does not replace the sabbath with Christ. As stated in the Old Testament chapter above, the sabbath is not typological, as is the temple. The temple is utterly replaced. The sabbath is not replaced, but becomes a benefit of the atonement. This is John's message when he juxtaposes the sabbath controversy with the eucharist. John does not replace the sabbath with the eucharist.<sup>13</sup> He makes it point to Christ, giving opportunity to receive the benefit of rest in him.

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<sup>13</sup> This conclusion departs from Rordorf's assessment that the Lord's Supper stands in the place of the sabbath for the church. See the discussion of Rordorf in the Review of the Related Literature above, and Rordorf, p. 303.

## Chapter IV

### Conclusion

This is the answer to the problem stated for this study. The Old Testament sabbath functions in the New Testament as a benefit of the atonement.

The New Testament writers have taken the hermeneutical liberty, with Christ as their authority, of converting the literal commandment of the Old Testament into that inward condition of peace which nurtures the fruit of the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:16-26).

Does this mean that the church must not keep a sabbath day, such as Saturday or Sunday? The correct answer would be that there is no sabbath as a day in light of New Testament revelation. However, this does not preclude a church body from choosing a day in which to reflect upon its sabbath rest in Christ.

In certain times and places it may be proper for believers to observe a day in order to give witness, much as the Rechabites in Jeremiah were called to do with regard to wine and obedience to an ancestor. However, this must be guarded with extreme care to preclude a legalistic sabbath. To legislate Sunday as the very sabbath rest would be misleading, and potentially harmful to some members.

Spirit-guided, thoughtful sabbath teaching should be an ethical concern for all ministers of the Gospel. Let Christ have full sway over the sabbath day's burden.

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